

# The Covenant with God

## The Jubilee & the Gospel to the Poor

Kenneth Jupp

IF SPIRITUAL RENEWAL is to take place, argues Kenneth Jupp, the Christian churches will have to recover their understanding of the theology of land – the central teaching of what was originally called the Old Covenant.

In September 2001, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster made headlines when he averred that Christianity was “nearly vanquished” in Britain, the Christian backdrop to social, economic, and political decisions having disappeared. The decline in respect for religion in general in the Western world corresponded with the rise of poverty during the Industrial Revolution. Churches are emptying, and the firm basis of Christian belief has given way to multiculturalism, and humanism, with rights becoming more important than duties, pleasure more important than

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service, and compensation expected from courts of law for any of life's adversities.

How Christianity may regain its role in Western society – by making itself relevant to the needs of the millions of people who have not gained from the material riches that were made possible by the Industrial Revolution – is explored by the author. He believes that the social relevance of the churches is contingent on their regaining the mission defined by Jesus: representing the interests of the socially excluded, the impoverished people whose birthrights have been expunged by the privatisation of what were traditionally social property rights in land.

THE REVOLUTIONS of 1789 in France and 1917 in Russia set out deliberately to destroy religion, and put science in its place. Both those countries came close to succeeding in this. The atheism of Karl Marx spread rapidly to many parts of the world. In the twentieth century two World Wars, causing immense casualties both civil and military, left devastation all over Europe, and weakened the moral fibre of both victors and vanquished.

In more recent years, "fundamentalism", which formerly meant adherence to traditional orthodox beliefs, has become fashionable in many religions, and in the Islamic world, has been seized upon by the disaffected as a stimulus to insurrection,<sup>1</sup> while corrupt governments have used it as an instrument of oppression. It now means hatred of rival religious systems, and in many cases implies a duty to wage holy wars against them.

In attempting to deal with these problems, specialist departments of study have grown up. Philosophy has spawned the sciences of Economics, Sociology; and other studies which have built up empires of their own, with their own vocabularies, and their own models of the universe. These new studies usually have little or no regard to Cardinal Newman's famous lectures on *The Idea of a University*, in which universal knowledge is to be taught under the overall guidance of religion.

One of the worst examples of studies isolated from reality is the "dismal science" of Economics, which has become entirely divorced from theology. The Economist is concerned with the creation and distribution of wealth, but does not usually bring God into his theories of creation. The priest equally does not insist that he should. Yet God is the creator of wealth, as He is of all things, and it is essential to begin from the First Cause. Few economists have raised their sights high enough to reach towards higher causes. Even fewer have attempted to bring the First Cause into their thinking. The priest, in his anxiety to save souls, is content to leave economics "to the experts",<sup>2</sup> and, although scripture has much to say about land, labour, wealth, and the terrible gap between rich and poor arising therefrom, he rarely refers to the economic teaching of scripture. In particular, Christ's "gospel to the poor" is given no prominence in Christian teaching. Thus the divorce between science and theology is, so to say, consensual.

The result is that economic theories are too complex for ordinary intelligent people to understand; so contradictory that no two economists seem to agree about them; and so impractical that the ups and downs, sometimes disastrous, of national and international economic conditions from time to time compel violent changes in the theories which try to explain them. If economic theory were guided by the philosophic and

moral considerations of religion, surely it would be simpler, more easily understood, and much more practical?

By neglecting theology, Economics in its modern form has imprisoned itself in the trap of dualism – seeing things in twos: Labour and Capital, Value and Price, Master and Servant and so on. What a harvest of enmity between classes has arisen from this kind of thinking! Labour *versus* capital, master *versus* man, have against have-nots. Political correctness, has now changed Master and Servant into Employer and Employee. But this has merely helped to obscure the truth, that these and other apparent contraries are all, on a wider view, resolved and reconciled by a third force, until ultimately made One in the Creator.

God is One, but is a Trinity, and the universe reflects the nature of its Creator. Thus systems of leverage are threefold (force, weight, fulcrum). Music uses triads of notes to make Harmony. Atoms are said to be the conjunction of three forces (proton, electron, neutron). Three primary colours make up the spectrum of white light, etc. The energy which goes into the creation of wealth has to be a threefold synergy. Language, before it lost too much of its grammar, reflected this by describing objects (nouns) as masculine, feminine, or neuter; and by specifying (in the verb) three persons who perform actions; and making both objects and actions singular, dual, or plural.

**Economics & Political Economy** ECONOMICS stands out today as rooted in duality. It was not always so. The 18th and early 19th century writers on *political economy* appreciated what Aristotle called “the threeness of things”, and described three factors in production – Land, Labour, and Capital. This was admirable, and could be clearly seen working in a society which was still largely agricultural. The labourer took wages for his work, the capitalist was paid interest for the loan of his savings,<sup>3</sup> and the landowner took whatever was expected to be left over, his only contribution to the undertaking being permission to use his land. The oddity of this last contribution was observed, commented on, and indeed challenged by many of the classical political economists. By what right could the landowner demand payment before he would allow the resources of the earth to be worked on by Man? Surely these resources must be God’s providence for the support of the human race? Why should the landowner have power to block that provision unless paid to allow access to it? The scriptures have a good deal to say on the subject. They make it clear that this blockage is the prime cause of poverty.

**The Jewish Scriptures** EVERY RELIGION has its collection of holy books. It is a remarkable fact that three of the great religions of the world depend ultimately on the teaching contained in the Hebrew scriptures. To

the Jews, these alone are the scriptures. Of supreme importance are the first five books (the *Pentateuch*) containing the *Torah* (the Law). The other books were loosely referred to as "the prophets".

Following the break-up of Alexander the Great's extensive Empire, a form of Greek called the *Koinê* (meaning "common") was in use over most of the Near East. Accordingly, for the benefit of Jews, especially in Egypt, their scriptures were translated from the original Hebrew into Greek. The resulting version, published in Alexandria more than a hundred years before the birth of Christ, was known as the *Septuagint* (abbreviated to *LXX*) from the traditional belief that it was made by seventy or seventy two scholars.

To this version of the Judaic scriptures the early Christians added the gospels, the letters of St. Paul and other Christian texts to constitute together the Bible, a word derived from the Greek *Biblia* (a plural word meaning "books"). All these were, it is believed, originally written in Greek. That other parts of the gospels might have relied on an Aramaic original nevertheless remains a possibility.<sup>4</sup> Up until the second century, the Jewish part of the Bible was called the Old Covenant, a title which correctly reflected its contents.

THE IDEA of a covenant between the God of Israel and His people is fundamental to the religion of the Hebrew scriptures. The very first covenant, of which the rainbow was a token, was made between God and Noah as representing the survivors of the flood (Gen. 9: 11-17). The covenant made at Sinai with the chosen people is a constant theme from Chapter 6 of Exodus onwards. The Gospels were said to establish a new covenant through the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ. The old covenant was sealed with the blood of animals. The new covenant was sealed by the blood of the son of God. **The Old Covenant**

The Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*. It occurs over two hundred times in the Hebrew scriptures, and always means covenant. In the Septuagint *berith* was rendered by *diathêkê*, which in late Greek had the same meaning. Unfortunately, when the Bible was later translated into Latin for the benefit of Christians in Italy and North Africa, *diathêkê* was taken in its ancient classical Greek sense, and the old *diathêkê* was mistranslated as *vetus testamentum*. The two parts of the Bible then began to be called the old and the new *testaments*. This is wrong, and the *texts* of the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible, the Church of England's New English Bible, and the Good News Bible all now translate *diathêkê* as covenant. But the *titles* Old Testament and New Testament, which do not reflect their true contents, unfortunately remain.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of the Torah was made clear by Christ himself in the

gospels. Time and again he based his teaching on the Old Covenant, and said with emphasis concerning the Torah:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy but to fulfil. For *verily I say unto you*, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from *the law*, till all be fulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

The sacred book of Islam, the Koran, meaning "recitation", consists of oral revelations, supernaturally received in a trance-like state by the prophet Mohammed between AD 610 and his death in 642. These were then collected and arranged by a panel of editors under the direction of his amanuensis Zaid ibn Thâbit. It is uncertain to what extent any of the revelations were put into writing during the prophet's lifetime. Their content, however, is very clearly derived from the Hebrew and to a lesser extent from the Christian scriptures.

In many passages it is stated that the Koran had been sent down 'confirming what was before it', by which was meant the Torah and the Christian gospels; the content of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, excepting such falsifications as had been introduced into them, were taken as true and known.<sup>7</sup>

Professor Arberry also points out that

Since the Koran is to the faithful Muslim the very Word of God, from the earliest times orthodox opinion has rigidly maintained that it is untranslatable, a miracle of speech which it would be blasphemous to imitate. It is thus the duty of every believer to learn to understand its meaning in the original Arabic.<sup>8</sup>

The same could well be, but is not, said of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. The various modern English and American versions demonstrate very wide variations in meaning extracted from the original when filtered through the personal preferences of the translators. In some places the text has even been corrupted. The Authorised Version of 1611 at least had the merit, as a matter of policy in accommodating the High and the Low church where the committee of translators were not unanimous, of deliberately choosing words which were open to different interpretations according to the perceptions of the reader.

**History of the Torah** THE BOOK of Genesis is a family history of Abraham and his descendants, laced with interesting stories and anecdotes about various of his relatives as they together left Ur of the Chaldees with their families and flocks and all their possessions. The journey of about 600 miles to Haran in north-western Mesopotamia must have taken a very long time. From there some time later they again slowly migrated with all their possessions to Canaan 400 miles to the West. Such was the success

of the move that Abraham became very rich. As pastoral nomads the Israelites had done well, living on the inferior land which lay between the fertile plains of Mesopotamia, and the rich Nile valley in both of which a number of very advanced and very powerful civilisations had developed long before. All these, whether Indo-European, Semitic, or other, appear to have been polytheistic. Abraham and his tribe worshipped One God only. This could be the reason for his leaving the Mesopotamian civilisation, although his ultimate move from Canaan to the civilisation of Egypt was due to famine in Canaan.

Abraham and his family had prospered and expanded. They ultimately became twelve distinct tribes, no longer nomadic, and no longer merely pastoral. They were a settled and populous people, recognisably a nation. But they had no land. A nation is by definition<sup>9</sup> a "large number of people of mainly common descent, language, history etc., usually inhabiting a territory bounded by defined limits, and forming a society under one government". A nation without land is an anomaly. Land provides space in which to live, and the materials for Man's labour. Inevitably people without land can only get a living by serving and working for those who do have land. This is what happened to the tribes of Israel when they settled in Egypt.

A covenant is a bond entered into by two parties by which each pledges to do something for the other. The first covenant between God and Abraham, in Gen. 15, was God's promise both to expand the descendants of Abraham into a populous nation (v. 5), and to give them a land to inherit (vv. 6 and 15). Strangely, this was a one-sided covenant, because although Abraham prepared the formalities for making the covenant, he then fell into a deep sleep (v. 12), and the Almighty enacted the formalities without him. It was an unconditional covenant. There are among the Israelis of today some who appear to consider that the Jews have an unconditional right to the land of Palestine. However the covenant was renewed by God in due form with Abraham (Gen. 17), and made again with his son Isaac (Gen. 26, 24), and again with his grandson Jacob on two occasions, on the second of which Jacob was renamed Israel (Gen. 28 and 35). "The Promise, the Choice, the Covenant, the Law – these are the golden threads, the warp and woof of the Pentateuch."<sup>10</sup> The Jews were the chosen people, their patriarchs had been promised land. But they lacked the cohesion, and purpose of government to win it.

The book of Exodus tells of the emergence of Moses as Israel's leader, and how, under the constant guidance of God, he led the Israelites out of captivity into the desert, where at mount Sinai, he acted as mediator to have the covenant with God re-affirmed by the whole people. The "book of the covenant" was brought out of Sinai, accompanied by a theophany of thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, and with due ceremony "read

in the audience of the people, and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient" (Ex. 24, 4-7). This theme is referred to several times in the Koran, which also tells of the subsequent disobedience of the people, despite the warnings of their prophets.

**The Land between the two rivers** EXTENSIVE archaeological excavation of Ur of the Chaldees and Mesopotamia, the Land between the two rivers, was carried out early in the twentieth century. Not only did the archaeological finds illumine the account of Abraham's journey, they also brought to light some astonishing similarities between the Code of the Covenant and some parts of the codes of law not only of the Semitic, but also of the Hittite, and Assyrian codes. It has been suggested that Abraham would have been aware of these laws. He seems to have been contemporaneous with Hammurabi whose detailed code of laws may indicate a common law shared between the peoples of the Near East in ancient times. Some of the Bible stories are illuminated by the code. Sarah's punishment of the slave girl Hagar, for example, is in accordance with it. Jacob's complaints against Laban over the care of his sheep are said to be in accordance with sections 261 to 267 of the Code of Hammurabi!

The archaeological finds came as something of a shock to many Biblical scholars, and former theories that the Torah was written several centuries after the time of Moses had to be reconsidered. There had already in the nineteenth century been some archaeological exploration, and the Pontifical Biblical Commission had, as early as 1906, put Catholic scholars on their guard against the Documentary Theory of different sources known as JEPD. The later excavations showed that the Hebrews were part of a very ancient and very advanced Semitic culture, superseded from time to time by alien nations from the North and East, who left traces of similar codes.

One of the features of Sumerian society was its stratification into three classes based respectively on the King and his Court, the Temple and its priests, and the Merchants in the Market. All three depended on a fourth class of peasant proprietors to sustain them by a rural economy of agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry, particularly of sheep. There was a large population of slaves, and much of the Code of Hammurabi is concerned with their treatment. The peasants were free, but subject to forced unpaid labour (*corvée*), compulsory military service, and large imposts payable to the Court or to the Temple. The difficulties of keeping out of debt in this fourth class were enormous, and all over the East the peasants sold their children as slaves, or as a last resort submitted to slavery themselves, ostensibly to work off the debt, although the interest charged by the creditor usually made this impracticable, and the

slavery became permanent. Accordingly, in order to maintain the dwindling rural population, from time to time, usually on occasions of note such as the coronation of a new monarch, debts were declared cancelled, and debtors freed from their bonds.

These "clean slate" provisions are probably reflected in the law of Jubilee established as part of the Torah in chapter 25 of Leviticus. But the Jubilee was considerably more refined and more far-reaching. It is in effect a clean slate and a freeing of debtor-slaves to be enacted as a matter of law at regular intervals of fifty years. It is an important feature of the Mosaic law, for a number of reasons: first, because the prophets of later times raged against its non-observance; secondly because when the people were released from the Babylonian captivity, there seems to have been an attempt to restore the Sabbath year (every seventh year), if not the Jubilee.<sup>11</sup> It was again neglected to the fury of the later prophets. Last, but most importantly, Christ endorsed and attempted to restore the Jubilee in his early teaching (Lk. 4).

THE JUBILEE was an essential part of a wider scheme designed to ensure that the promised land was shared equitably between the families of the twelve tribes. The land of promise was to be given to the whole nation as their common inheritance, and had to be maintained as such. The key word, much used in the bible, is inheritance. Accordingly, before the conquest the Lord instructed Moses:

### Sharing the Land

Ye shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land, and dwell therein: for I have given you the land to possess it. And ye shall divide the land by lot for an inheritance (Gk. *katakléronômêsete*) among your families: and to the more ye shall give the more inheritance, and to the fewer ye shall give the less inheritance (Numbers 33: 53-54).

In the course of the campaign, after some land had been conquered and distributed, the LORD repeated this injunction to Joshua:

All the inhabitants [of the land that yet remaineth] ... will I drive out from before the children of Israel: only divide thou it by lot (Gk. *en klêrôî*) unto the Israelites for an inheritance, as I have commanded thee (Jos. 13: 6. Cf. also Num. 26: 55-56; Num. 34: 13, and other references).

After the whole of the promised land had been equitably divided, it was necessary to ensure that families would never lose their inheritance. The Torah had therefore to provide means for restoring equity after the natural changes that would inevitably occur in the course of a generation or two. Some families will have enlarged, others will have declined in number. Some will have suffered crop failures or loss of animals through storm, drought, disease, war, and other calamities, and many will have been



forced into slavery through debt. Accordingly the law of the Jubilee made an adjustment to re-establish equity after "seven Sabbaths of years", that is, every fifty years. The practical purpose of the Jubilee was doubtless to check the growth of an oligarchy of rich landowners. It stopped the land falling into the hands of those who could thereby enrich themselves, and oppress the poor. It was designed to prevent a repetition of the servitude to which the children of Israel had been reduced by lack of land when they were in Egypt.

The Lord had warned Moses in Mount Sinai:

The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev. 25: 23).

In the Soncino edition of the Pentateuch and Haftorahs, Chief Rabbi Dr. J.H. Hertz comments:

This verse enunciates the basic principle upon which all these enactments [of the Torah] rest. 'The earth is the Lord's' (Ps. 24: 1), and His people hold their lands in fee from Him. The ground itself, then, was not a proper object of sale, but only the result of man's labour on the ground.

The Torah recognised the importance of land, and the possibility of slavery resulting from lack of land. No Hebrew could become permanently the slave of another. He had to be freed when he had paid the debt for which he was sold. The seventh year was a Sabbath year, in which he had to be freed whether the debt was paid or not. In the Jubilee year, he had to be released, no matter how long he had served, and whether or not he had repaid the debt. In the Jubilee year every man returned to his possession of land (Lev. 25; 9, 10, and 28).

Every seven Sabbaths of years ... shall be unto thee forty and nine years. Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the jubile (*sic*) to sound ... throughout all your land. And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim *liberty throughout all the land* unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return *every man unto his possession* and ye shall return *every man unto his family*.

Liberty, return to the family, and return to the family inheritance is the substance of the Jubilee.

### **Christ at Nazareth**

IMMEDIATELY after the temptation in the wilderness Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all (Lk. 4:13). When he reached Nazareth, where he had been brought up, we are told the content of this teaching. In the synagogue there, all bare him witness and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. However, this

favourable reception did not last. Those who heard him were ultimately (verse 28) filled with wrath. They thrust him out of the city and led him to the brow of the hill on which the city stood, that they might cast him down headlong. But he, passing through them went his way. Why such fury? He was teaching, as he probably had done in the rest of Galilee, "the Acceptable Year of the Lord", the Jubilee which was part of the Torah (the Law), which Jesus made clear would not pass away. It was for ever. It was seen as a direct attack on the propertied classes. A review of what the Jubilee really meant might well cause a similar fury in some quarters today. It would probably be dismissed by some as "Old Testament stuff".

Christ's teaching at Nazareth was "the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:16 ff.). He read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, having himself found the place where it is written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the *gospel to the poor*; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty<sup>12</sup> them that are bruised, to preach the Acceptable Year of the Lord. And he closed the book ... (Is. 61: 1 and 2)

He stopped the quotation at this point abruptly, indeed dramatically, in mid-sentence. The complete sentence in the Hebrew version would have been "to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, *and the day of vengeance of our God*". But he was presenting Israel with the opportunity to accept the sovereignty of God by restoring to the poverty-stricken in Israel the common inheritance promised them by God. Only later when the Kingdom had been firmly rejected would *the day of vengeance of our God* become relevant. It was rejected then, and remains rejected today. It should be no surprise that the history of the Christian world since Jesus' time has demonstrated that "day of vengeance" in nearly two thousand years of abject poverty contrasting with great wealth, accompanied by disease, famine, oppression, tyranny, corruption, revolution, and never-ending war. History shows that, as in Jesus' time on earth, there is a close connection between land, debt, imprisonment, slavery, and war. This is so whether one looks at the Roman empire, at Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, or at Britain and Europe after the end of the middle ages, poverty is always associated with oppression.

The whole tendency of the beatitudes would suggest that Jesus was here concerned, as the Torah was concerned, with material poverty. When he condemned the scribes and Pharisees for devouring widows' houses, he was following the tradition of the psalms and of the prophets who had long bewailed the prevalence of poverty and oppression following the neglect of the Law. The Acceptable Year of the Lord was a constant theme of the prophets, not least Isaiah. The Psalms too bemoaned the poverty caused by

the rich oppressing and preying on the poor, and stealing their inheritance of land in defiance of the Torah. For example (and there are many more):

- Psalm 10: 8 describes the wicked who “sitteth in the lurking places of the villages; in the secret places doth he murder the innocent; his eyes are privily set against the poor. He lieth in wait secretly as a lion in his den; he lieth in wait to catch the poor; he doth catch the poor, when he draweth him into his net.”
- Similarly in the prophets (Is. 3:14): “The Lord will enter into judgement with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord God of Hosts.”
- (Is. 5: 8) “Woe unto them that join house to house, and field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!”
- The book of the prophet Micah is one long bemoaning of the oppression of the poor by robbing them of their heritage of land: (Mi. 2: 2) “they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage”.
- Jesus uses the same sort of language in declaring “Woe” unto the hypocritical establishment of his day: “for ye devour widows houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Mt. 23 14, Mk 12 40, and Lk. 20 47).

In Psalm 37 (numbered 38 in the Greek versions) the psalmist tells us not to fret about the evil doers. They will be cut down like grass, and cut off, but the righteous are assured that “they shall inherit the land”. Five verses end with this phrase. In verse 9, it is those that wait for the Lord who will inherit the land (the Hebrew is *Ha Aretz*, which can mean either the earth or the land. Today it is the title of a Tel Aviv newspaper). In verse 11, it is “the humble”; in verse 22, “such as are blessed of Him”; in verse 29, the righteous; in verse 34, “those that wait for the Lord and keep His way”.<sup>13</sup> Verse 11 is especially important because it was quoted by Christ as one of the so-called beatitudes (Mt. 5; 5). In a footnote to verse 11, Dr Cohen explains that “humble” means “They who smarted under the oppression of the sinful”. The Hebrew word is *G'anaim* which means the oppressed, or down-trodden, and is translated as “afflicted”, in 50 of its 80 occurrences in the AV. It refers to “the oppressed class – the peasantry or *fellahin*, who then, as now, lived quiet lives and were the victims of constant oppression, ill treatment, and plunder at the hands of their autocratic rulers”.<sup>14</sup> In the AV, this word, when quoted by Christ, is translated as “the meek”, thereby robbing this telling phrase of its prime significance.<sup>15</sup>

Only if one ignores all these pointers, could Psalm 37 be taken to describe only submission, obedience, or humility; the spiritual, together with material, poverty practised by St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis' interpretation is perfectly legitimate, because there are often many layers of meaning in the words of Scripture. But it does not do to ignore the primary, down to earth, meaning which is so obvious in the passages here quoted.

Christ in the beatitudes described the Kingdom (*basileia*)<sup>16</sup> of Heaven in terms of the scriptures of the Old Covenant, declaring the joy of the poor and oppressed (*ptôchoi, praeis*) when they come into their inheritance (*klêronomeo* again) of land, and the joy of "those who hunger and thirst for Justice; for they shall be satisfied". Thus the means by which sharing of land might be achieved for the benefit of the community could well be called *geocleronomy*. This would be to adopt the very word our Lord is reported as using.<sup>17</sup>

WHEN GOD instructed Moses, and later Joshua, to divide the promised land equitably between the Israelite families as their inheritance from Him, the words used in the Septuagint (Greek) are *klêronomeo* and *en klêrôi*. These are very important words occurring often in the Old Testament. The root – *klêros* – is the "lot" inscribed with one's name which is cast into a receptacle whence the winner's name is drawn. Hence (Liddell and Scott's Greek Dictionary) it comes to mean "that which is assigned by lot – an allotment of land to the citizens": hence again "any piece of land, farm or estate". Thus *klêronomeo* means "to receive one's share of an inheritance; to inherit". In ancient societies dividing by lot was widely considered the fairest way to distribute what could not be precisely cut into equal pieces. The soldiers used it for parting Christ's garments at the crucifixion (Mk. 15: 24). Children do the same today, often through selection by nursery rhyming. *Klêros* is therefore a suitable word to imply equitable sharing. Christ himself used it.

### Sharing the Promised Land

After his near assassination in Nazareth, Christ only taught "the gospel to the poor" in parables. Chapter 16 is concerned with the huge gap between wealth and poverty, which is certainly no less glaring an injustice today than it was then. It commences with the parable of the unjust steward. The parables often liken God to a man, beginning with a phrase such as "A certain man made a great supper", or "A certain man had two sons", or "A certain nobleman went into a far country". Similarly in chapter 16 of St. Luke's gospel:

There was a certain rich man, which had a steward (Gk. *oikonomos*), and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his (the rich man's) goods'. He was

accordingly told to give an account of his stewardship (*oikonomia*), "for thou mayest no longer be steward (the verb *oikonomeō*)". What should he do? "I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what I shall do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship (*oikonomia*), they may receive me into their houses." He thereupon called every one of his lord's debtors and released them from a large proportion of their debts to the Lord, which he, the steward, had been embezzling. "And the lord commended the unjust steward (*oikonomos*), because he had done wisely". He had made friends of the mammon of unrighteousness.

There is no difficulty in understanding this apparent approval of injustice. Riches are associated with the ownership of great estates, and the Torah lays down as law that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof". God has the greatest estate of all with stewards who are only "strangers and sojourners" with Him. The steward, in those days usually a slave who managed the estate for the owner, was accused of embezzlement, spending on himself what belonged to the owner. There is no significance in the fact that the three Greek words used in the parable are those from which our words economics and economist are derived. It is merely a happy coincidence. But it would be good if economists took note of the parable. Many an oil millionaire has followed Christ's recommendation to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness by founding a charitable institution into which to put his rents.<sup>18</sup>

On hearing this parable the Pharisees, "who were covetous ... derided him", and this is where in Luke's gospel Christ again insists that the Law must be fulfilled, illustrating the divorce law as an example. Christ then went on to describe the rich man clothed in purple and fine linen, and faring sumptuously every day, while the beggar named Lazarus was laid at his gate full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table (Lk. 16: 19, 20).

**The Meaning of the Covenant** THE LAW (Torah) of the Old Covenant underlies the three great religions of the world. In return for obedience to the Law, God promises prosperity in a land often described as "flowing with milk and honey".<sup>19</sup> Under the rule of God (Thy Kingdom come), there can be no landlessness and therefore no poverty, no oppression, no bondage. Unless crippled in body or mind, the people are free, because they have the means of subsistence.

When all is said and done, this is a matter of common sense. But the detail of the biblical provision for it was only suited to the largely agricultural economy of those times, in which change was so slow that the inevitable distortions which crept into it could be assessed and set to rights at intervals of 50 years. Hence the Jubilee. To translate this into terms suitable for today's fast-changing scene, one must ask how can a man work if he has no land on which to put his farm, his workshop, his

office, or whatever is necessary for the type of work to which he is suited? How can he live if he has nowhere to lay his head when work is done? How can he get at the resources of the planet which are the material on which he must work, if he does not inherit his share of land? Lacking land himself, he can, as did Israel in Egypt, only look for a master who has land, and who can therefore put him to work. To work as a good servant has been the pride and joy of some, and does them honour. There is pride in domestic service. Churchill proudly described himself as a servant whom the people could dismiss at their will. Judges are servants of the Crown, as are the armed forces including Admirals and Generals. But service is by no means suitable for everyone. Independence is natural to most.

The problem today is how to share the benefits of land, so that the majority of people are not bound to serve. It cannot be physically divided for that purpose. Any attempt to divide the nation's territory in that way could only work, if at all, in a very primitive agricultural community. The pace of change is such today that new discoveries can transform the economy in a very small span of time. Arid desert, for example, or the deep sea-bed, can suddenly be turned into rich oilfields, making individual private owners millionaires, so to say, overnight. The skies can unexpectedly become valuable as cyberspace, the use of which has to be bought for £ billions. In recent years governments in Britain have demonstrated how this difficulty can be overcome. The oil has been treated as public property, and those who extract oil from the North Sea have had to pay something resembling a rent, or royalty, to the exchequer in respect of the oil they extract. The proceeds are then used for the purposes of the community. Similarly the mobile telephone developer Orange, had to pay £2bn to the exchequer for its monopoly of a part of cyberspace, which again was treated as public property. This is the shadow of a principle that could be applied to all the natural resources of the planet. They are part of God's abundant providence for the benefit of mankind. The community should therefore collect Rent for their use by individuals. The principle has been applied in Alaska, where, since 1982, royalties collected by the State government from the exploitation of the State's plentiful oil deposits have been used for public purposes. The surplus remaining after meeting public expenditure, has then been distributed to each family. A family of four can usually expect to receive over \$1,000 each year in this distribution.

Poverty can only exist when the abundance of providence is allowed to fall into the hands of private owners; who, as Isaiah put it, "join house to house, and field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!"; or in Christ's words to the Pharisees, "ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer". This was

recognised a century and a half ago by, John Stuart Mill, one of the last of the political economists when he wrote:

Suppose that there is a kind of income which constantly tends to increase without any exertion or sacrifice on the part of the owners, these owners constitute a class in the community whom the natural course of things progressively enriches, consistently with complete passiveness on their own part. In such a case it would be no violation of the principles on which private property is founded if the State should appropriate this increase of wealth, or part of it, as it arises. This would not properly be taking anything from anybody; it would merely be applying an accession of wealth created by circumstances to the benefit of society, instead of allowing it to become an unearned appendage to the wealth of a particular class.

Now this is actually the case with rent. The ordinary progress of society which increases in wealth, is at all times tending to increase the income of landlords; to give them a greater amount and a greater proportion of the wealth of the community, independently of any trouble or outlay incurred by themselves. They grow richer, as it were in their sleep, without working, risking, or economising. What claim have they, on the general principle of social justice, to this accession of riches? <sup>20</sup>

The first step, he said, should be a valuation of all land in the country. Then after an interval "the increase in value should be estimated and be taken as land-tax, which for fear of a miscalculation should be considerably within the amount thus indicated". If this recommendation had been passed into law in the nineteenth century, one can imagine the immense relief from the burden of today's taxation which would have been achieved. In fact things have now got so much out of hand that more drastic measures are necessary. But Mill's scheme at least indicates the frame-work. Those who appropriate to themselves the resources of Nature should pay rent for them to the rest of the community.

**Interpreting the Scriptures** THERE ARE often many layers of meaning in words. Throughout the scriptures material things are used as metaphors for psychological, or spiritual, instruction. This is not confined to the parables, which are of course overtly metaphorical. Actions too can be symbolic. The way you take it depends on the type of person you are: for example active, emotional, or intellectual, as exemplified perhaps by Martha, Mary and Nicodemus. But it does not do to ignore the primary, down to earth, meaning which is so obvious in the passages which deal with the problem of poverty. For example, all three synoptic gospels cite Christ's words to the rich young man: "It is easier for a camel to go through the needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God". A perfectly feasible interpretation of this saying, which, as it happens, commends itself to the present writer, is that your intellectual baggage, your emotional prejudices, and the like must be discarded. But surely no-

one would suggest ignoring the obvious everyday meaning that being rich in this world's goods stands in the way of realising the Kingdom of Heaven?

The scriptures can also be taken interiorly or exteriorly. The doctrines of the transcendence and of the immanence of God have to be held in parallel. The mystics have no difficulty in seeing this.<sup>21</sup> But the Bible is not just a sacred document that speaks to our spirituality. It is also a practical manual for conducting the affairs of a community, and the earliest Christian communities took it as such.<sup>22</sup> But of course these early Christians were outcasts from the Roman *dominium* which controlled the law of the land in which they lived, and their attempt to put it into practice failed, as it was bound to do.

ONE CAN understand why, in former days, when the Church as established in most Western countries was one of the richest landowners, and was further usually dependent upon tithes, it was blind to Christ's "gospel to the poor". Of course the Church needs to be and ought to be sustained by the revenues from land, as ought also the Universities, and the Grammar Schools, and the Hospitals. They were so supported in the Middle Ages. But the bequests of land to all of them were haphazard, and did not take account of the rights of others. The result was a body of landless poor who were sucked into industrial factories where they earned grossly inadequate wages, and endured appalling slum living conditions. For the most part they lacked education, and lacked religion. The Churches were foremost in helping the poor by eleemosynary, which came to be called charity, thus degrading an important word used in the scriptures for a special degree of love. In the 20th century governments adopted charity of this kind as a basis for taxation to relieve poverty, and thus created the government-enforced charity of the welfare state. But this then left no room for the true Christian goal – the universal inheritance of land, and thus the abolition, rather than the relief, of poverty.

### **Rôle of the Church today**

In recent years there has been a decline in reliance on biblical authority, and many hindrances to understanding it have arisen. Following the second World War a sizeable proportion of the population of Britain bought the freehold of their houses or flats, in order to take advantage of an unusual inflation of the currency, and rocketing house prices. This has enabled them to some extent, in the words of John Stuart Mill, "to grow richer, as it were in their sleep, without working, risking, or economising". The sense of security this gives them, or in the case of the next generation the expectation they have of inheriting this accumulating wealth, blinds them to the injustice of it, and also hides from them that they are pygmies in this matter by comparison with the millionaire and billionaire giants of



the commercial land market. They will in consequence have great difficulty in accepting intellectually that they would be far better off if, relieved of the labyrinthine tangle of stealth taxes on nearly all their expenditure, they paid rent for their ground instead. Convinced that the only way to deal with poverty is to relieve it, if necessary even by increased taxation, they would not easily be persuaded that the abolition of poverty would prick the bubble of the enormous welfare state for which they are at present having to pay.

A further obstacle to justice has arisen from the extent to which Britain's nineteenth century system of representative government has deteriorated into mere democracy, in which executive government deals directly with the people, by-passing parliament wherever possible. Hence much legislation is by rule and order, often merely adopting directives from Brussels. The government strains every nerve to stay in power by pleasing the voters, whom they make great efforts to deceive in doctored announcements to the media, instead of testing their proposals in parliamentary debate by the people's representatives.

It will now need a revolution in understanding for homeowners to perceive that "the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine". Without a change of heart such as perhaps only religion can bring about, it may be that greed will continue to stand in the way of, and to weaken the sense of Justice. A change in faith would be by far the most effective antidote to present thinking. It does not help that in scripture the Greek word for Justice (*dikaïosunē*) is nearly always translated as "righteousness". In its modern connotation that word aptly describes the Pharisees, who were so righteous that they tithed mint and rue and all manner of herbs, but as Christ warned them, passed over judgement and the love of God (Lk. 11; 42). It was ever thus.

The Church is now no longer to be counted among the rich, and Churchmen are becoming ever poorer. Could they now accept the challenge to preach Christ's gospel to the poor? They could take as their text Christ's words in the third and fourth beatitudes:

Blessed are *hoi Praeis* (the oppressed poor) *hoti autoi kléronômêsousin* (for they shall inherit) *tên gēn* (the earth or the land).

Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after Justice (*Dikaïosunē*): for they shall be satisfied (Mt. 5 and 6).

It would be for the churches to preach *geoklêronomy* from the pulpit. It would be for the universities to establish faculties combining all the related social, legal, anthropological, and theological sciences to replace some of the discredited studies of the dismal science of economics. Under their influence Parliament could then begin to understand the necessity for resuming the collection of the Crown's revenue as overlord of our heritage

the land, which in the early middle ages provided virtually the whole of government's peacetime revenue.

- 1 Cf, Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.1.98, cited in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, "the list of landless Resolutes". In some editions of *Hamlet* this has been changed to Lawless!
- 2 The Archbishop of Canterbury has said as much.
- 3 Strangely, it took centuries for the schoolmen of the Church to allow this. See Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, and Turgot's *Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth*, paras 73-5.
- 4 Especially in Catholic circles. See p. 6 of the Introduction to the Old Testament in *The Jerusalem Bible*.
- 5 In *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 95, Dr E.W.Bullinger gives a detailed history of this mistake, which he says "has been nothing less than a great calamity".
- 6 Mt. 5. 18, amongst the beatitudes (italics added). Also in Lk. 16 18, a chapter concerned with poverty, where a similar warning was given specifically to the Pharisees.
- 7 See A. J. Arberry *The Koran Interpreted*, The World's Classics, Oxford, 1964: Introduction, p.xi.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.ix.
- 9 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.
- 10 *The Jerusalem Bible*, Introduction, p.13.
- 11 See Josephus, *Antiquities* XI 8 26, and 1 Macabees vi 53.
- 12 In *Soncino Books of the Bible*, Isaiah, p. 298, the Revd. Dr Israel Slotki MA, Litt.D, remarks that "The Hebrew word *deror* is the term used in connection with the year of Jubilee (Lev.25, 10). What that year signified to the harassed individual the coming redemption will mean for the nation".
- 13 *The Psalms*, Soncino Press, translation edited by The Revd. Dr A.Cohen.
- 14 Bullinger, *How to enjoy the Bible*, London: Samuel Bagster, 1970, p. 255.
- 15 Liddell and Scott's Greek dictionary points out that *ptôchos*, translated "meek" in the AV, means "properly one who crouches or cringes, hence a beggar. It always had a bad sense until it was ennobled in the gospels"!
- 16 *Basileia* means the extent of a king's rule. It is not a place as in the phrase "the kingdom of Sweden".
- 17 Of course this may have been a translation of an Aramaic word. We cannot tell.
- 18 "Mr Five per cent" Gulbenkian, Rockefeller, Getty, and others.
- 19 In the Koran (xix, 25), Mary is assured that the birth of her son will bring plenteous food and drink.
- 20 J.S.Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 9th edn, Bk. V, ch. ii, para. 5.
- 21 A very useful examination of mysticism, mostly but not exclusively Christian, is to be found in *Mysticism*, by F. C. Happold, Penguin, 1963.
- 22 Acts 4:34 ff., and the story of Ananias in chapter 5.

## References